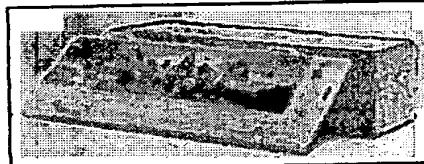


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Burial vault artwork adds personal touch

BY KRISTIN ZAGURSKI
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

An Iraqi girl waves an American flag. A U.S. tank topples a statue of Saddam Hussein. Soldiers march and tanks roll by as planes whiz overhead.



A photo from the manufacturer shows a print like the one placed on Marine Cpl. Shane Kielion's burial vault.

After Marine Cpl. Shane Kielion's graveside services Wednesday at St. John Cemetery in Bellevue, Kielion's mother, Pat, stepped forward to look more closely at the vivid scenes.

She was followed by other mourners who wanted to see the lid to Kielion's metal burial vault. It had been covered with a colorful print depicting images of the war in Iraq. Written on the lid were Kielion's name, unit and years of birth and death.

The burial vault for Army 1st Lt. Edward Iwan of Albion, Neb., who was buried Monday and like Kielion was killed in the fighting in Fallujah, Iraq, also was decorated. In Iwan's case, the vault had an emblem of a saluting soldier.

Customizing the lids to burial vaults is a relatively new practice in the funeral industry, but it seems to have caught on with the families of war veterans, as well as firefighters and police officers.

An American flag covered the lid of Omaha Police Sgt. Jason Tye Pratt's vault. Pratt was killed in the line of duty in September 2003.

Since a burial vault holds the casket, the images are seen for only a short time at the cemetery. Still, families see this as another way to personalize memorial services, and those in the industry say most vault makers now offer the option.

"All of the companies are very well aware of what's going on overseas and are trying to make those tributes as personal as possible," said David Walkinshaw, a spokesman for the Brookfield, Wis.-based National Funeral Directors Association.

Artist Ray Simon of Youngstown, Ohio, designed the print on Kielion's vault for Wilbert Funeral Services Inc. The local office for the company, Omaha Wilbert Vaults Inc., donated the print, though not the vault. It also supplied Pratt's vault.

The Broadview, Ill., company has prints commemorating veterans of World War II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars and the New York City rescue teams from the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. It also has nonmilitary images that include a country road, a snow-covered bridge and mountains.

The artwork is applied to a clear sheet of vinyl, which is affixed to the lid.

The vividness of the artwork and the detail of the letters make it look as if the image is painted on the lid and the letters engraved, said Kelly Nobiling, vice president with Wilbert Vaults.

"It's personalizing it for the family," she said. "It's making it special."

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